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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [TS](#)

SUBJECT: TUNISIA: JOURNALIST TRIED, INDEPENDENT PAPERS PUT
"UNDER SIEGE"

REF: A. TUNIS 849
[1](#)B. TUNIS 834
[1](#)C. TUNIS 803

Classified by Ambassador Gordon Gray for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) The trial of Tunisian independent journalist Taoufik Ben Brik, charged with assaulting a woman in a late October incident his supporters insist was manufactured by a government seeking revenge for writings scathingly critical of Ben Ali and his government (ref C), was held in Tunis on November 19. The trial was attended by Helene Flautre, a member of the European Parliament, Ben Brik's French lawyer (who joined his defense team), and a leader of the international NGO "Reporters without Borders." Several western diplomats, including embassies, appeared at the venue but, faced with an intimidating security presence, did not enter the court room. Civil society contacts reported that many Ben Brik supporters were denied access to the trial: Prominent activists Sihem Bensidrine and her husband Omar Mestiri were refused entry. Several traveling from other cities were reportedly stopped by police and turned around on the highway.

[1](#)2. (C) According to accounts from the Embassy's civil society contacts, Ben Brik's lawyers asked the court for a postponement to give them more time to prepare and review the indictment, asked that Ben Brik be released on bail, and asked that they be allowed to meet with him in jail if he is not released. The judges reportedly denied all three requests and announced that they would deliver a verdict on November 26. Addressing the judge directly, Ben Brik reportedly insisted that his case was an act of revenge driven by "Ben Ali and his political police," and protested that a signed confession said to be in the hands of prosecutors was a forgery.

[1](#)3. (C) Meanwhile, opposition journalist contacts reported to the NGO "Reporters without Borders" that plain clothes police simultaneously placed "under siege" the offices of the three principle opposition newspapers (all published in Arabic), denying workers and journalists access to their offices: "Al Mawqif" published by the the Party for Democratic Progress (PDP); "El Tariq al-Jadid" published by the leftist "Tajdid" (renewal) Party; and "Mouatinoun" published by the Democratic Workers Forum for Liberty (FTDL). Embassy contact Rachid Khachana, editor of Al-Mawqif, told the NGO "Reporters without Borders" "This is the first time since the creation of our paper in 1984 that we were denied access to our offices."

[1](#)4. (C) Comment: While we have not yet independently confirmed the reported blockades of the opposition papers, such actions (usually temporary) are a standard tactic the GOT employs against political opponents. It is perhaps no coincidence that the trial and the reported blockades came on the same day President Ben Ali warned in remarks at a credentialing ceremony for a group of ambassadors (including

the U.S. Ambassador) against "foreign interference in Tunisia's affairs." (ref A). End comment.

GRAY